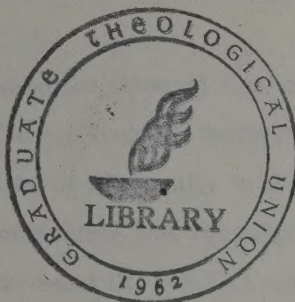


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February 7, 1980

CHURCH ACTS AGAINST
U.S. DEATH PENALTY BILL

WASHINGTON, D. C. -- Episcopal Church officials have moved quickly to oppose a federal death penalty bill that has been placed on the Senate calendar without legislative hearings.

The Rev. William L. Weiler, Ph.D., associate ecumenical officer for Washington affairs, has written to each member of the Senate to point out the Episcopal Church's long-standing firm opposition to a death penalty and urging them "to respond to the call of the Episcopal Church and other members of the religious community to oppose legislation that under any circumstances would place in human hands the taking of a single life."

The bill -- designated S-114 -- is called a "procedural bill" by its supporters, who argue that all it does is establish and clarify procedures for jury hearings that consider the death penalty for conviction of certain federal crimes.

The action is based on a 1976 Supreme Court decision holding that the death penalty is not inherently unconstitutional. Supporters of a death penalty inferred that if procedures for imposing the sentence were made more rational and less arbitrary, then a death penalty might stand a court test.

Religious communities argue that such a measure clears the way for imposing a death penalty for nearly a dozen federal crimes without permitting any debate over whether there should actually be a death penalty. The argument -- held widely across denominational lines -- claims that even the existence of a death penalty violates the sanctity of life that is God's gift.

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The Episcopal Church consistently has opposed capital punishment on the basis that "the life of an individual is of infinite worth in the sight of Almighty God; and the taking of such a human life falls within the providence of Almighty God and not within the right of man."

That resolution first passed the General Convention in 1958, was reaffirmed in 1969 and again in 1979, when the Church took the further step of asking its dioceses and members to work actively against the death penalty in their states.

The measure under consideration was introduced last year by Sens. Dennis DeConcini (D. - Ariz.), Strom Thurmond (R. - S.C.) and S.I. Hayakawa (R. - Calif.). The Senate's Judiciary Committee reported the bill out favorably in January although no hearings had been held.

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Attachment: Sample letter

Dear Senator _____:

For the past two decades the official bodies of the Episcopal Church have expressed their strong opposition to the death penalty. At the most recent meeting of the triennial General Convention of the Episcopal Church, our clergy and lay people reaffirmed this church's opposition to Capital Punishment, "on a theological basis, that the life of an individual is of infinite worth in the sight of Almighty God." Our resolution states that it is not within the right of humankind to take a human life; this awesome act belongs solely within the providence of Almighty God. The full text of the statement is enclosed for you.

With dismay I note that the Senate Judiciary Committee reported out the federal death penalty bill S-114, although there were no hearings on the bill during the 96th Congress. Since it is likely that S-114 will soon come to the Senate floor, I urge you to vote against it, either as a separate bill or as an amendment to the Criminal Code bill.

I further urge you to respond to the call of the Episcopal Church and other members of the religious community to oppose legislation that under any circumstances would place in human hands the taking of a single life.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. William L. Weiler
Washington Affairs Officer

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